

2017

# **Politeness as a part of mentality: Russia and Britain**

**Final project of the World of Britain course**

Lidia Makarenkova  
Moscow State University

## **Table of Contents**

**PART 1. INTRODUCTION TIMELINESS OF THE TOPIC... ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.**

**PART 2. POLITENESS: WHAT DOES IT MEAN.....5**

**PART 3. POLITENESS AND ENGLISH/RUSSIAN HISTORY .....6**

**PART 4. POLITENESS IN THE WORLD OF DIVERSITY: BRITAIN AND RUSSIA .....8**

**PART 5. CONCLUSIONS .....13**

**PART 8. SOURCES .....14**

### Timeliness of the topic

It's very difficult to underestimate the meaning of politeness in British culture. For centuries this category has been the core of lifestyle and attitude towards many essential topics. At the same time I should say that politeness in English culture is of very unique and unusual kind. It has strong connection to British sense of humor and specifically irony. I'd like to begin this project with a picture symbolizing an ambivalence of our topic:



Speaking about Russia, I would say that the meaning of being polite has changed drastically through centuries of our history. We had very different periods, and often the very essential basis of politeness couldn't stay the same way when a new type of political and social change occurred. Only one thing always remained the same. In Russian mentality politeness always has been an important and highly praised dignity, reconfirming personal level of education and general intelligence.

I chose this topic in many ways based on my personal life circumstances. Currently I've been living in Japan, and this country is well known to have the most polite people in the world. For instance politeness is even supported by the specific grammar forms of Japanese language. But before coming to Japan I heard many stories of unparalleled British politeness. So it was quite interesting to check how comfortable will these extremely polite Britons feel themselves in a very polite society of foreign country. And I would say that according to my friends opinions in many cases it's easier for Brits to follow very strict and highly ritualized rules of everyday day life of Japan. I found the following link with discussion on this topic extremely interesting:

<https://www.quora.com/Who-are-more-polite-British-people-or-Japanese-people>

On the other hand being Russian and having Russian mentality here in Japan in multicultural environment of English school doesn't cause me any significant difficulties in understanding of people's behavior. As far as I know some of my friends have problems of that

kind. The way I chose for myself to avoid any possible troubles is relatively easy - act like you are a part of the Soviet era movie. Surprisingly it works.

I believe that this topic is very important for everybody who plans to communicate with representatives of other countries or nationalities. Polite behavior can solve many problems and make your life much easier. Especially in the countries where historically politeness has been playing a huge role in society. In this project I am going to compare some core categories of politeness in British and Russian culture. Hopefully it will help to make a few examples of cultural diversity easier to understand.

## **Politeness... What does it mean?**

According to an article posted on Wikipedia, politeness is the practical application of good manners. Sounds very clear and simple to me. But I'm not completely convinced that this category can be defined that easily. During preparations for this project I checked a few forums discussing a nature of politeness. And 2 definitions sound of a great interest for our topic:

- - well understood frame of rules and conventions which guide how you should behave in society
- - an attitude where you consider the others feelings, needs and point of view and take that to heart when you decide on your own actions.

This is a point of view of a British man, who tried to compare culture of politeness in different countries. He thinks that the second definition is much closer to British standards. Doesn't it sound controversial to the usual cliché we use when we think about the Brits as cold blooded yet thoroughbred people? I would say that in every country the second definition is desirable, ideal result we should try to reach. But even if we try our best I'm afraid the attempt to make a complete universal list of components, contributing to politeness, will inescapably fail. The reason is that politeness will always be culture based. In this aspect it's even more difficult in case of Britain, cause recently the country became extremely diverse, with people coming from all over the world. Same goes for Russia, with lots of nationalities living close to each other. But probably because of all unifications and standardizations we underwent historically people of Russian Federation tend to follow one way of etiquette rules. Of course we have exceptions, for example nationalities of small-numbered people. They live in their own small communities with their unique language and culture. But nevertheless in general they still behave similarly to other Russian citizens, once they visit other cities of our country.

Another important topic we should touch if we speak about politeness is the tough choice you have, when you can be either polite or sincere. There is a popular comedy show in Britain, called A Very British Problem. One example of typical joke is the situation when customer at restaurant try being extremely polite and not able to say that in fact he doesn't like the food there. Basically he just hides the truth because he doesn't want to be rough. In some countries it will be considered to be bad, when you literally lie. Even if you can call it a white lie. As for Russia I told before that we have quite unified way of thinking in case of morality and politeness, but at the same time in some classes of society being sincere considered to be much more important than being polite.

I think that one of the most important difficulties we have talking about the politeness is that we never can be open-minded enough. We still use clichés and stereotypes, but in this project I'll do my best to avoid them as much as possible.

### Politeness and English/ Russian history

We all know a word "gentleman". But not so many people know that originally it meant a particular social position, the lowest rank of English gentry, right above a yeoman and below an esquire. Usually this category included the younger sons of the younger sons of peers and the younger sons of baronets or esquires. But time flies, and after a while the term transformed to designate any well-educated man of good family and distinction. Now it has 2 meanings: we can use this word, when we show respect for all man, as in the phrase *Ladies and Gentlemen*. Or when we stress good manners and level of politeness somebody demonstrates (*He's such a gentleman*).

This word can serve as a perfect example of how politeness changed in Britain. In many ways it started as part of the fashion. In Britain in the Age of Enlightenment people self-consciously tried to act more polite and sophisticated in attempt to resemble the behavior of upper classes. Especially middle class bourgeoisie became preoccupied with the art of etiquette, elegant dressing and graceful conversation. They tried so hard that soon the necessity of professional advice for them became undoubted. Joseph Addison and Richard Steel founded a daily publication called the Spectator in 1711. It was giving a regular advice on how to be a polite gentleman. Finally the fashion of being polite extended so much that a subculture of gentleman's clubs appeared (2).



*A club of Gentlemen by Joseph Highmore*

Conversation in such place would be strictly regulated by the rules of politeness. Originally those clubs were established for British upper-class, but then popularized by upper-middle class. Historically these members-only private clubs reached their popularity peak in the late 19th century and early 20th century. At that time London had over 400 of those establishments.

In Russian tradition we can see totally different situation. There is an opinion that Russian people consider classical type of politeness to be false and insincere.

I was nearly shocked to realize that it's almost impossible to find in internet any information about history of politeness in Russia. As I told before the history itself is rather confusing because of so many changes our country survived. But still there is no significant evidence even of easily written agenda considering this topic.

In my opinion we started to pay more attention to the questions of etiquette and politeness during the reign of Peter (in the late XVII century, beginning of XVIII century). With a great change in technologies and culture, countless importations from other countries we imported many behavior tips as well.



Next centuries in Russian history followed the lead, we started to export European traditions and standards of behavior. In 19th century with its growing adoration of French culture, aristocracy tended to hire nannies directly from France. As a result children in rich families were raised by representatives of other culture, were educated in the atmosphere of foreign moral ideals. Same applies to the rules of politeness. Russian society was divided into 2 parts with different types of cultural background. There is no surprise that the way they adopted the nature of polite communications was different in many aspects. Since that period our country has changed a lot. But in my opinion that significant difference just continued to spread. Even now in modern Russia we still have society divided.

## **Politeness in the world of diversity: Britain and Russia**

As the saying goes, good manners cost nothing. But it's not always true. Let's start with the business etiquette. I compared 2 articles, one written in Russian language for those willing to start their career in London. And another one - in English, which is a compilation of pieces of advice necessary to start business relationship. First of all I should notice that being myself Russian I found some ideas in the second article rather controversial or old fashioned. Probably same goes for the first article, but I assume that such topic as business manners or politeness can't be portrayed 100% authentic unless you have experienced living in both countries in recent time.

According to the article on British business manners there are 3 main points one should follow to become successful in company's environment:

- use Thank you and Please as much as possible. This could be quite crucial for your future career.

The study of the University of Sussex and University College London is devoted to comparing 1350 requests in British and American corporate mails. It revealed the fact that Brits use the word please twice as much as Americans. It seems to be essential and highly required to apologize a lot, to thank people a lot once you enter a British company. It contributes to the society based on status levels. Historically for Brits it's very important to keep the distance and the roles between people. Polite words such as Thank you or Please can be of great help in this case. I would say that recently in Russia we don't use these words that often comparing to the Soviet period. One of the possible reasons is that the working temp became much more dynamic, and many people consider using the words of politeness too often as wasting their time. Or even worse - as being insincere or pretentious. As well in some way it can be explained by a desire to be closer to American business traditions with their straightforward approach.

- follow a ritual of tea and biscuits.

Many clichés about British people are obviously wrong, but one is 100% true. This is a British obsession with tea drinking. Some companies even have an established tea-break time. It can sound like something out of fashion, but in fact right now tea-time is making a comeback. And of course it's only natural, if you'll ask other people if they want a cup of tea too before making tea for yourself. Because this tradition is very important, it can be a key-note in building a good relationship with coworkers. Even during serious business meetings Brits pay attention to the fact how their tea is served. It came to the point that one of British biscuit bakers, Thomas J Fudges took a poll revealing which type of cookies is the most desirable in the setting of negotiations. Shortbread, chocolate bourbons and flapjacks proved to be the best choices.



I wonder if any of Russian businessmen ever thought about an ideal type of biscuit suitable for their business meetings. Of course in Russia it's very common and natural to have a cup of tea or coffee in a middle of a working day. But it's not that much formal, and in some companies headquarters even try to prohibit such a tradition. And I don't need to mention that it's not a way of socialization. It's just how people take a moment to relax in the middle of the day. Some social interactions are possible if there is a kitchen in the office, but in many cases it all ends with people sitting with their cups in front of the computer. We don't have any specific rules describing the correct way to have such a break. In a second article it's stated that there are lots of coffee included in business meeting process. I would agree that in Russian business environment the coffee is much more common. But other than that same etiquette rules are applied. For example the way a company's secretary serves drinks can be a sign of an appropriate negotiations flowing.

- Never miss corporate gatherings, socialize by drinking alcohol with your coworkers.

It seems to be very hard to be part of office's real life if you are not a big fan of alcohol. Drinking etiquette is very specific part of corporate style in the UK. Business day is usually not very long, it finishes at 5 pm, and many colleagues go to the pubs for a drink and chat. This is there their formal politeness finally becomes more sincere. Drinking culture in Britain has long history, but according to the recent polls the number of young people drinking a lot of alcohol reduced slightly. But still the figures are impressive.

I think drinking tradition is quite the same in Russian and British cultures. In both countries it's time to relax, break some ice and start informal communications. In Russia an attitude towards alcohol is pretty controversial. On the one hand a habit of drinking is considered to be unfavorable. Having said that I should mention that in business environment you can hardly avoid drinking. More than that the way you act when you actually already drunk can be observed rather carefully. Inappropriate behavior in this case may cause serious problems in relationships with your business partners or colleagues. Or may not.

And now let's talk about business manners common in Russia. As I mentioned before some of the observations seem to be very old fashioned. So I will write about only couple of ideas which seem to be true.

- In Russia you should always look good. It contributes to 2 basic rules I completely agree with.

1 - Dress neatly. Russian people usually don't pay much of attention to the dress code, in many cases, if you don't have to meet clients on a daily basis, you can dress rather casually. But once dress code is mentioned it should be followed strictly. I assumed that it's pretty much the

same in case of the UK. And by all means when it comes to business/partners meetings suites are absolutely necessary. Small but very representative detail of how much it is important to be neatly dressed is the fact that Russians often carry around little sponges to repolish their shoes whenever it may be needed. For man businesslike haircut is important, for woman - neutral manicure.

2 - Stress your status by the items you choose. I wouldn't say that this statement applies to all office workers in Russia but without any doubt in case of serious business talks it will be duly noted. Italian brands are very popular and to make a good first impression you have to demonstrate that you are prosperous enough to afford them. As far as I know Brits don't pay that much of attention to the exact fashion brands they wear. It's enough if you are comfortable with the clothes you wear.

- Use the Patronymics and respect the status of the person you meet with.

Only 10 years ago patronymics were part of daily conversation between colleagues in Russia. Now the situation changed slightly, but still in many cases it's better to know the exact name of your colleague's father. In case of talking to your boss in the majority of cases patronymics are necessary. This very specific part of Russian corporate culture has been followed particularly strict in all levels of government offices.

Overall the article on Russian business etiquette represents one very important characteristic of Russian business life. Much more attention is paid to negotiations and business meetings, rather than daily office life.

\*\*\*

Now let's go back to daily politeness. Stereotypically Brits considered to be very polite and considerate people. We already talked about many aspect of business manners. But there is one more, both crucial for corporate and private life. This is punctuality. The Brits are believed to be one of the most punctual nation in the world. On the controversy for Russians in many cases it's nearly impossible to come in time. We even don't have a fixed working start time in some companies. And another example from a private life. If you are invited to someone's house, it's a sign of a great politeness to come 10 or 15 minutes later. This way we give some time to our hosts to get ready for the meeting. That's the main point. Sometimes in Russia when you don't pay attention to the time of meeting, it means that you care about meeting itself and not about all small details the meeting consists of.

To the contrary Brits are famous to be very punctual. And as said before extremely polite. But at the same time there is an opinion that their politeness is just the other side of being double-faced. I found rather interesting a following table describing hidden meanings of British manners.

<b><i>What British workers say</i></b>	<b><i>What British workers mean</i></b>
With the greatest respect	You're totally wrong
That's not bad	That's rather good
That's quite good	That's rather bad
I'm not too bad	I'm good
It could be worse	It probably couldn't be worse
I'll bear it in mind	I've already forgotten about it
Sorry	Excuse me /Hello /I'm late /You're sitting in my chair /You've stepped on my foot
That's one way of looking at it	That's the wrong way of looking at it
I'm sure it's my fault	It's your fault
I'm easy	I'm happy with any of the options
I'm not trying to be rude	I'm about to be rude
I'm not trying to be funny	I'm about to be insulting
To be honest...	I'm about to be frank
Whenever you have a minute	Do it now
At the end of the day	When all is said and done
I might join you later	Don't expect to see me

**BBC CAPITAL**

Let's bring some particular examples of British everyday behavior and compare those to Russian standards.

1 Handshake is the most common form of greetings, both in formal and informal situations. I think it's quite the same for Russia as well. Maybe the only one difference is that in Russian tradition handshake can have other additional meanings. For example if it's a little bit too firm it can be a demonstration of power or superiority.

1 Kiss as an alternative form of greetings. In Britain it became quite common nowadays to kiss friends or family members on the cheek, especially after not seeing them in a while. One kiss is generally enough. In Russia kisses are very common among young women, even if they meet each other on regular basis. But at the same time men usually don't kiss each other. I think kisses and hugs are very essential part of Russian mentality. Unlike Asian nations we aren't afraid of touching other people and demonstrating emotions in a visible way. It seems to me that though Brits like hugs and kisses, they are more reserved.

3 Formal greetings. This is where we are totally different. Traditional How do you do? or How are you? in English has only one particular meaning. It's just a way to greet people. And nobody expect you to give an answer (though exceptions are still possible). At the same time in Russian when we ask the same questions in the majority of situations we are ready to get a detailed answer. Probably this special thing about our mentality is very unique. I don't think that it's caused by any kind of western or Asian influence.

4 Table manners are in many ways similar in many countries. There are quite obvious rules such as never blow you nose on a napkin or never pick food out of your teeth with your fingernails. At the same time some parts of British Dinner Etiquette may be not so common in

Russia. For instance we usually wait till our host start eating, but exceptions are possible. Usually in both cultures visiting somebody's house automatically means being respectful and very polite.

5. As the last element of particular interest I'd like to come back to famous British Lack of Directness. We already mentioned it before but I would say, that it's one of the most interesting topic for me. Being indirect basically means to be polite in Britain. Sometimes it's even used quite the opposite way. Brits insult people by being too polite. To name one example, if you apply for translator's job, but your English is not that ideal, your would-be-(not)-employee may say:

- I'm afraid your English is somewhat unorthodox for this job.

Which means:

- Miss Simmons, show this gentleman the door.

Do we use it in Russian language? Sometimes. At least in most cases we can understand the main idea. Do we hide the real meaning? Again, the answer is sometimes. Probably because of country's size and impressive number of citizens we have all the types of characters and temperaments. Some people in Russia seem to be very similar to typical British gentlemen. And it is no coincidence that one of the best movies describing the story of Sir Sherlock Holmes was directed in Russia.

## **Conclusions**

Before starting this project I was absolutely sure that Russians and Brits have totally different views towards politeness and etiquette. And I was so surprised to realize that in fact we are similar in many ways. We have almost the same standards, we share many habits and traditions. Being polite is an essential part of British culture and I would say that many people in Russia would say same words about Russians. We are easy going, open minded, but at the same time we respect other cultures, other people personalities, especially when it comes to business environment.

Long and unique history of Russian Federation contributed a lot to our mentality, to our understanding of politeness as a category of morality. It's still changing. But the main, most important thing remains the same - Russian politeness is an attitude rather than just simple frame of rules. I want to believe that it's the same for Brits, that they express true feelings.

XXI century has changed the UK. British people travel to many countries, they mingle with other nationalities and share their cultural experiences. I think in future British politeness will remain one of the most positive and impressive national characteristic in the world.

And at the end I'd like to mention one of common clichés foreign people have about Russians.

People in Russia don't smile.

I would say that people in Russia smile a lot. We do smile and we will prove that Russians are part of a very polite multicultural country.

## SOURCES

1. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politeness>
2. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gentlemen%27s\\_club](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gentlemen%27s_club)
3. <http://businessculture.org/northern-europe/uk-business-culture/business-etiquette/>
4. Киран Нэш "Вежливость, пунктуальность, выпивка: как выжить в британском офисе", BBC Capital <http://www.bbc.com/russian/vert-cap-39293408>
5. <http://www.cntraveler.com/stories/2009-11-11/etiquette-101-russia>
6. John Oakland, British Civilization An Introduction [http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/lili/personen/mpaetzold/04sose/britciv/britciv01\\_politeness.pdf](http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/lili/personen/mpaetzold/04sose/britciv/britciv01_politeness.pdf)
7. <http://newsnotwanted.blogspot.jp/2008/04/britain-which-has-long-prided-itself-on.html>
8. William Hartstone, Independent <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/do-we-need-good-manners-1357195.html>
9. [http://www.ehow.co.uk/video\\_4984491\\_tips-become-perfect-gentleman.html](http://www.ehow.co.uk/video_4984491_tips-become-perfect-gentleman.html)
10. Understanding British Politeness, the LOnDonSalad.com <http://www.thelondonsalad.com/british-politeness-and-etiquette/>